

# HUMANITARIAN LAW & POLICY



## Why we must defend humanitarian storytelling in a divided world

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**Najum Ul Saqib Iqbal**

Head of Communications for  
East Asia – the International  
Committee of the Red Cross  
(ICRC)



*For as long as humans have existed, stories have been our bridge to one another. Today, in a world shaped by digital networks, synthetic media, and hyperconnected feeds, that bridge is under*

*unprecedented strain. Storytelling remains one of the most powerful ways to counter division and remind us of our shared humanity, yet it is also increasingly manipulated, dismissed, or drowned out in a noisy and polarized information landscape. The risk is not simply losing narratives but losing the very empathy and recognition that underpin humanitarian action.*

*In this post, ICRC Communications Coordinator Najum Ul Saqib Iqbal argues that in an age of competing truths and rising dehumanization, telling stories of dignity and resilience is not a luxury but a moral necessity, an act of resistance against apathy, and a vital means of reconnecting us across divides.*

*ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · Why we must defend humanitarian storytelling in a divided world*

In ancient times, people gathered around fires to share stories of distant lands and unknown faces. These tales stitched communities together, made strangers familiar, and sparked understanding where none had existed. That essence has not changed. In today's age of hyperconnectivity, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms, storytelling still pulls distant lives into our hearts and minds. It continues to connect us – not despite our differences, but because of them.

Anthropologist Polly Wiessner<sup>[1]</sup>, who studied how early human societies used stories, observed that they weren't just entertainment. They expanded listeners' imaginations and helped them better grasp the lives and motives of others. This is the plain definition of the much-heard word, "empathy".

Over the past decade, advances in digital technology have transformed how we tell stories. Powerful images, immersive videos, and global platforms have widened the reach and scope with which people interact with individual stories. We all remember the viral footage of Ukrainian refugees crossing icy borders with their pets, or the haunting image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi's lifeless body washed ashore – a single moment that rallied global sympathy for Syrian refugees. Those were the human stories that moved us all and thrust us into action to mobilize our governments.

Technology hasn't just widened the reach of humanitarian storytelling; it has deepened its impact. It has reminded us that we live on one small, fragile planet. That there are fellow humans who are trapped in unending cycles of violence and destruction. That violence, war, and displacement are not just about others; they are about us, too. Such realizations have undoubtedly promoted more camaraderie. When used with care and intention, humanitarian communication builds what we might call *common humanity*. It urges us to care for each other and support those in need. It makes us raise our voice for injustices and mobilize our governments and international community to help stop it.

That is one side of the coin.

## The other side

Alongside these breakthroughs in empathy, something darker has been growing: a dehumanization that makes human suffering normal or even desirable. The former foreign minister of Singapore, George Yeo, explained this in the following words: When people see their opponents as demons, they no longer treat them as human. That's at the root of what we are seeing in some of today's armed conflicts: an utter disregard for each other's basic humanity<sup>[2]</sup>.

Currently, we are witnessing around 130 active armed conflicts – uprooting the lives of millions, creating extreme political divisions and rising nationalism within many countries, widening polarization due to geopolitical competitions between major powers, and an ever-increasing number of natural disasters. Amidst all this, the most dangerous trend we have witnessed are the narratives that refuse to accept even the basic humanity in those considered the enemy.

## The most dangerous trend: dehumanization[3]

Groups of human beings labelled as parasites. Others condemned based not on what they have done, but on where they live, how they look, or with whom they align. Sometimes, such lows come from the highest possible political levels. This *dehumanization* is not a side effect of war – it is a tool used within it.

To make things worse, digital technologies and AI are now amplifying these dynamics: they create a distance, a sort of virtualization of the “other”. They are no longer human, but mere numbers, vague images. They become abstract and therefore easier to kill. Synthetic media, deepfakes, manipulated footage, and targeted disinformation campaigns are not just blurring the truth – they are replacing it.

In this combative information environment, where the dominant message is often “you are either with us or against us”, what space and attention does a humanitarian narrative have which does not take sides? How can a message be heard which talks about peoples hopes and hardships but without political rhetoric? How can individuals and humanitarian organizations who are still concerned with the human impact of natural disasters, armed conflicts, trade wars and economic sanctions avoid being targeted and maligned for not toeing a particular line?

## More pressure on humanitarian voices

Organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stand at the crossroads of this crisis. The ICRC’s mandate is to protect life and dignity in armed conflicts, regardless of political affiliation, gender, age, or religion. But increasingly, its efforts to communicate humanitarian needs and promote respect for international humanitarian law are met with suspicion and hostility. Its access is constrained, and neutrality is questioned.

An even starker manifestation is the implicit or explicit hierarchy of whose suffering deserves recognition. Who is granted the status of victim? Who is worthy of empathy?

Is it the Ukrainian mother fleeing bombardment? The Afghan boy living with a war injury since infancy? The Gazan photojournalist dodging airstrikes with a pot on her head because she can’t afford a helmet? The Sudanese family digging graves in a street that once bustled with morning tea vendors? A Russian soldier held as prisoner of war?

Instead of inspiring empathy across borders, some crises now provoke indifference – or worse, glee – depending on the victims’ identity or political context. Even purely humanitarian narratives are dismissed as propaganda if they do not align with certain political views. This erosion of empathy is not just a communications problem. It is a moral one.

## What humanitarian communication really is . . . and isn’t

As humanitarian communicators, our job is not to campaign for peace agreements or conflict mediation. Our task is simpler, but no less vital: to remind people of their shared humanity. To tell stories that reflect the depth of suffering and resilience, without stoking further division. To convey the human consequences of political decisions, without preaching or politicizing.

Yes, this might sound idealistic. In today’s world, that simplicity can be mistaken for naivety. But it is precisely this clarity of purpose that is most needed.

We do not promote abstractions. We tell the story of *Ahmad*, a boy from Afghanistan’s Ghazni province who lost a limb in infancy and continues to rebuild his life at age 14. We follow the resilience of *Daw Win Mar*, forced to flee violence in Myanmar’s Sagaing region and now supporting her family, including three grandchildren, in a displaced people’s camp in

Mandalay. We show the courage of [Samar](#), a freelance photojournalist in Gaza, who braves bullets with nothing more than a kitchen pot on her head for protection as she documents her community's reality.

These are not just data points. They are people. And if we stop telling their stories, we stop seeing them.

## Resisting the pressure to conform

There is intense pressure for humanitarian voices to “toe the line”. To speak only when convenient. To take sides.

We must resist that pressure.

We must push back against the narrative that some lives are worth more than others. That empathy can be filtered through ideology. We must say, again and again, that there is no such thing as collateral humanity.

Yes, there is criticism. Yes, the sheer number of global crises can reduce human tragedy to numbers. But we must never accept that fate. We must break through the statistics and bring the stories of individuals to light. Even when resources dwindle. Even when media cycles move on. Even when the moral clarity of neutrality is under attack.

Because the moment we stop insisting on the universal value of every life, the foundations of humanitarianism begin to crumble.

## Communication as resistance and reconnection

Humanitarian communication is not just a moral gesture. It is an act of standing against apathy. Against disinformation. Against weaponized narratives that divide and dehumanize.

But it is also an act of reconnection. It is about rekindling the ancient human bond that allowed our ancestors to gather around a fire and say, “This happened to someone far away, and it matters to us here.”

In an era of algorithmic division and geopolitical noise, this connection is revolutionary, bringing us back to our core identity as human beings.

We are not powerless in the face of digital distortion. We are not voiceless amid political spin. We can and must keep telling stories that centre human dignity and build a culture of empathy. Not because it is fashionable. But because it's the only way forward.

## The bridge we cannot afford to burn

The challenges are real. The attacks on humanity are growing. But so is the importance of what we do. In a fractured world, trust is precious. Human connection is fragile. Communication is the bridge that holds it all together.

If we let that bridge collapse, if we let human lives be ranked in value, empathy be politicised and humanity be eroded, then we will have lost far more than a narrative. We will have lost our compass.

Let's not let that happen. Let's keep telling stories that reaffirm the dignity of every human being. Because in the end, there is no them. There is only us.

## References

[1] Professor Polly Weissner is a professor of Anthropology at the University of Utah and Arizona State University. She has spent years in researching the power of storytelling.

[2] Mr George Yeo's speech during the plenary of the 13th World Peace Forum in Beijing on July 3, 2025.

[3] If interested in understanding the phenomenon of dehumanization, please read Natalie Deffenbaugh who explores this topic in detail: <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2024/06/27/de-dehumanization-practicing-humanity/>

## See also:

- Natalie Deffenbaugh, *De-dehumanization: practicing humanity*, June 27, 2024.
- Ayan Abdirashid Ali, *Verses of mercy: how Somali oral traditions can mitigate conflict and support IHL*, June 5, 2025.
- Stephanie Xu, *Photographing neutrality: a personal reflection from the field*, August 10, 2023.

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